

NOTE

THE SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD

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The Sunday of the Word of God, instituted by Pope Francis and to be held every year on the third Sunday of Ordinary Time,^[1] reminds us, pastors and faithful alike, of the importance and value of Sacred Scripture for the Christian life, as well as the relationship between the word of God and the liturgy: "As Christians, we are one people, making our pilgrim way through history, sustained by the Lord, present in our midst, who speaks to us and nourishes us. A day devoted to the Bible should not be seen as a yearly event but rather a year-long event, for we urgently need to grow in our knowledge and love of the Scriptures and of the Risen Lord, who continues to speak his word and to break bread in the community of believers. For this reason, we need to develop a closer relationship with Sacred Scripture; otherwise, our hearts will remain cold and our eyes shut, inflicted as we are by so many forms of blindness".^[2]

This Sunday, therefore, presents an ideal opportunity to reread some of the Church's documents^[3] and especially the *Praenotanda* of the *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, which present a synthesis of the theological, ritual and pastoral principles surrounding the word of God proclaimed at Mass, but which is also valid in every other liturgical celebration (Sacraments, Sacramentals, Liturgy of the Hours).

1. Through the proclaimed biblical readings in the liturgy, God speaks to his people and Christ himself proclaims his Gospel;^[4] Christ is the centre and fullness of all Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments.^[5] Listening to the Gospel, the high point of the Liturgy of the Word,^[6] is characterised by a special veneration,^[7] expressed not only by gestures and acclamations, but by the Book of the Gospels itself.^[8] One of the ritual possibilities suitable for this Sunday could be the entrance procession with the Book of the Gospels^[9] or simply placing the Book of the Gospels on the altar.^[10]

2. The arrangement of the biblical readings laid down by the Church in the Lectionary opens the way to understanding the entirety of God's word.^[11] It is therefore necessary to respect the readings indicated, without replacing or removing them, and using only versions of the Bible approved for liturgical use.^[12] The proclamation of the texts of the Lectionary constitutes a bond of unity between all the faithful who hear them. An understanding of the structure and purpose of the Liturgy of the Word helps the assembly to receive God's saving word.^[13]

3. The singing of the Responsorial Psalm, which is the response of the Church at prayer, is recommended;^[14] the psalmist's function in every community, therefore, should be enhanced.^[15]

4. In the homily, beginning with the biblical readings, the mysteries of faith and the norms of the Christian life are explained throughout the liturgical year.^[16] "Pastors are primarily responsible for explaining Sacred Scripture and helping everyone to understand it. Since it is

the people's book, those called to be ministers of the word must feel an urgent need to make it accessible to their community".[17] Bishops, priests and deacons must develop a commitment to carry out this ministry with special dedication, making use of the means proposed by the Church.[18]

5. Particular importance is attached to silence which, by favouring meditation, allows the word of God to be received inwardly by the listener.[19]

6. The Church has always paid particular attention to those who proclaim the word of God in the assembly: priests, deacons and readers. This ministry requires specific interior and exterior preparation, familiarity with the text to be proclaimed and the necessary practice in the way of proclaiming it clearly, avoiding all improvisation.[20] It is possible to preface the readings with appropriate and short introductions.[21]

7. Because of the importance of the word of God, the Church invites us to pay special attention to the ambo from which it is proclaimed.[22] It is not a functional piece of furniture, but a place that is in keeping with the dignity of the word of God, in correspondence with the altar: in fact, we speak of the table of God's word and the table of the Body of Christ, referring both to the ambo and especially to the altar.[23] The ambo is reserved for the readings, the singing of the Responsorial Psalm and the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet); the homily and the intentions of the universal prayer can be delivered from it, while it is less appropriate to use it for commentaries, announcements or for directing singing.[24]

8. The books containing the readings from Sacred Scripture stir up in those who hear a veneration for the mystery of God speaking to his people.[25] For this reason, we ask that care be taken to ensure that these books are of a high quality and used properly. It is never appropriate to resort to leaflets, photocopies and other pastoral aids as a substitute for liturgical books.[26]

9. In the run up to or in the days following the Sunday of the Word of God it is fitting to promote formation meetings in order to highlight the importance of Sacred Scripture in liturgical celebrations; it can be an opportunity to learn more about how the Church at prayer reads the Sacred Scriptures with continuous, semi-continuous and typological readings and to explain the criteria for the liturgical distribution of the various biblical books in the course of the year and its seasons, as well as what the structure is of the Sunday and weekday cycles of the readings for Mass.[27]

10. The Sunday of the Word of God is also a fitting occasion to deepen the link between Sacred Scripture and the Liturgy of the Hours, the praying of the Psalms and Canticles of the Office, as well as the biblical readings. This can be done by promoting the community celebration of Lauds and Vespers.[28]

Among the many Saints, all of whom witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Saint Jerome can be proposed as an example because of the great love he had for the word of God. As Pope Francis has recalled, he was a "tireless [...] scholar, translator and exegete. [He had a] profound knowledge of the Scriptures, [and] zeal for making their teaching known. [...] In his attentive listening to the Scriptures, Jerome came to know himself and to find the face of God and of his brothers and sisters. He was also confirmed in his attraction to community life".[29]

The purpose of this Note is to help reawaken, in the light of the Sunday of the Word of God, an awareness of the importance of Sacred Scripture for our lives as believers, beginning with its resonance in the liturgy which places us in living and permanent dialogue with God. "God's word, listened to and celebrated, above all in the Eucharist, nourishes and inwardly strengthens Christians, enabling them to offer an authentic witness to the Gospel in daily life".^[30]

From the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 17 December 2020.

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- [1] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Motu proprio Aperuit illis*, 30 November 2019.
- [2] Francis, *Aperuit illis*, n. 8; Vatican Council II, Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 25: "Therefore, all the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word. This is to be done so that none of them will become 'an empty preacher of the word of God outwardly, who is not a listener to it inwardly' since they must share the abundant wealth of the divine word with the faithful committed to them, especially in the sacred liturgy. The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the 'excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 3:8). 'For ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ'".
- [3] Vatican Council II, Constitution *Dei Verbum*; Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*.
- [4] Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nn. 7, 33; *Institutio generalis Missalis Romani* (IGMR), n. 29; *Ordo lectionum Missae* (OLM), n. 12.
- [5] Cf. OLM, n. 5.
- [6] Cf. IGMR, n. 60; OLM, n. 13.
- [7] Cf. OLM, n. 17; *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, n. 74.
- [8] Cf. OLM, nn. 36, 113.
- [9] Cf. IGMR, nn. 120, 133.
- [10] Cf. IGMR, n. 117.
- [11] Cf. IGMR, n. 57; OLM, n. 60.
- [12] Cf. OLM, nn. 12, 14, 37, 111.
- [13] Cf. OLM, n. 45.
- [14] Cf. IGMR, n. 61; OLM, n. 19-20.
- [15] Cf. OLM, n. 56.
- [16] Cf. OLM, n. 24; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Homiletic Directory*, n. 16.
- [17] Francis, *Aperuit illis*, n. 5; *Homiletic Directory*, n. 26.
- [18] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangeliium gaudium*, nn. 135-144; *Homiletic Directory*.
- [19] Cf. IGMR, n. 56; OLM, n. 28.
- [20] Cf. OLM, nn. 14, 49.
- [21] Cf. OLM, nn. 15, 42.
- [22] Cf. IGMR, n. 309; OLM, n. 16.
- [23] Cf. OLM, n. 32.

[24] Cf. OLM, n. 33.

[25] Cf. OLM, n. 35; *Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, n. 115.

[26] Cf. OLM, n. 37.

[27] Cf. OLM, nn. 58-110; *Homiletic Directory*, nn. 37-156.

[28] *Institutio generalis de Liturgia Horarum*, n. 140: "Following ancient tradition, Sacred Scripture is read publicly in the liturgy not only in the celebration of the Eucharist but also in the Divine Office. The liturgical reading of scripture is of the greatest importance for all Christians because it is offered by the Church herself and not by the decision or whim of a single individual. Within the cycle of a year the mystery of Christ is unfolded by his Bride [...]. In liturgical celebrations prayer always accompanies the reading of Sacred Scripture".

[29] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Letter *Scripturae sacrae affectus*, on the Sixteenth-hundredth Anniversary of the Death of Saint Jerome, 30 September 2020.

[30] Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 174